



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
DRAFT September 6, 2002

Contact: Vickie Church (619) 338-2274
Liz Quaranta (619) 338-2360

FOOD SAFETY IS COOL WHEN KIDS HEAD BACK TO SCHOOL *County Environmental Health Offers Safety Tips For School Lunches*

School bells are tolling around the country as students begin a new school year. Although millions buy lunch at school cafeterias, millions more bring their lunch in the familiar paper bag or lunch box. "Now is the time for students to not only learn their ABC's, but also food safety basics when bringing lunch to school," said Gary Erbeck, Director of the County of San Diego Department of Environmental Health. "Safe 'bag' lunches are as important as learning math and science. In fact, food safety is a science." According to Erbeck, by following some simple food safety rules, students can avoid getting sick from a lunch that was not handled properly. Here are some basic tips for carrying a safe lunch to school:

KEEP FOODS CLEAN

Keep everything clean when packing the lunch. That not only goes for the food, but also food preparation surfaces, hands and utensils. Use hot, soapy water. Keep family pets away from kitchen counters. "Wash your hands before you prepare or eat food," Erbeck explains.

KEEP COLD FOODS COLD

The best way to keep food cold is with an insulated lunch box. When packing lunches, include either freezer gel packs, cold food items such as fruit, or small frozen juice packs. Place perishable meat, poultry or egg sandwiches between these cold items. Sandwiches can also be made ahead of time and kept refrigerated or frozen before placing in the lunch box. Freezer gel packs will hold cold foods until lunchtime, but generally will not work for all-day storage. "Any perishable leftovers after lunch should be discarded and not brought home," Erbeck advises. "If you must use paper or plastic lunch bags, create layers by double bagging to help insulate the food." Also, store the lunch bag or box in a cool place at school. Keep it out of direct sunlight and away from heat sources.

KEEP HOT FOODS HOT

Foods like soup, chili and stew need to stay hot. Use an insulated bottle stored in an insulated lunch box. Fill the bottle with boiling water, let stand for a few minutes, empty, and then put in the hot food. Keep the insulated bottle closed until lunch to keep the food hot.

For more information on packing safe lunches for school (and yes, work, too!) call the toll-free nationwide USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-800-535-4555. Additional information on food safety is available on the Internet at <http://www.foodsafety.gov> and at <http://www.usda.gov/fsis>.

###